

TESTIMONY

Good morning. My name is Neil Albrecht and I am the Deputy Director of the City of Milwaukee Election Commission. My purpose in testifying this morning is

- To speak to Milwaukee's positive and productive experience administering Election Day registration.
- And to address the allegation that Milwaukee is a "voter fraud" city and that Election Day registration has contributed to a "voter fraud" problem.

Nationally, use of the words "voter fraud" have been applied randomly and have been most often unsubstantiated. In a recent election in Hawaii, there were allegations of widespread voter fraud when six polling sites did not open on time. In Indiana, problems with new touch-screen voting machines were construed as election fraud. In Utah, where poll workers forgot a step in setting up a voting machine, there were allegations of voter fraud. The misrepresentation of these two words is often intentional and has been successful at intimidating and disillusioning voters.

Voter turn-out in Milwaukee during the 2004 presidential election was unprecedented. Beyond any dispute, the city's election systems were overwhelmed by the sheer volume of pre-election registrations and absentee voting activity. Due to Wisconsin's status as a "battleground state," the problems that were experienced attracted significant national attention, as did allegations of widespread voter fraud.

After both a state and federal investigation into the election, there were two voter fraud prosecutions and neither related to Election Day registration. While the act of voter fraud in any election is not acceptable, two prosecutions hardly warranted the labeling of Milwaukee as a voter fraud city.

Fortunately, allegations of voter fraud did not overshadow Milwaukee's record-breaking turn-out in the 2004 presidential election. 277,535 ballots were cast representing 70% of the city's 397,000 registered voters. Nationwide, Wisconsin ranked second for voter turn-out, just below our neighboring state of Minnesota. There were many factors that contributed to Milwaukee's success in motivating voter turn out, including the City's longstanding history of engagement in political processes. Unquestionably, the most significant contributing factor was the availability of Election Day registration. Of the nearly 278,000 voters, over 80,000 – or 29% - registered to vote on Election Day.

Voting is a citywide event that crosses into every neighborhood, community, gender, age and economic class. Despite the overzealous and inaccurate allegations of Milwaukee being a voter fraud city, voting as a right is woven deeply and throughout the cultural fabric of Milwaukee. Election Day registration has consistently encouraged voter participation. In Wisconsin's most recent gubernatorial race, nearly 35,000 of the 172,000 voters registered to vote on Election Day. That number represents one in five voters.

Offering Election Day registration does require an additional administrative investment on the part of any municipality. Voting rooms are set up to allow separate areas for Election Day registration so as to avoid long lines and delaying the issuance of ballots to registered voters. In Milwaukee, we provide trained registrars at every polling site. At our 208 sites, this represents an investment of around 320 additional election workers... a nominal investment considering the outcome: civic engagement and voter participation.

The value of Election Day registration exceeds increased voter participation. It is also evidenced by the demographics of the Election Day registrants: young people, apartment occupants – or people more transient, and persons from the lower socio-economic classes.

During the 2006 gubernatorial election, I received a call from the Chief Inspector at Riverside High School, a voting site close to the UW-Milwaukee campus, notifying us that they were running out of Election Day registration applications. On delivering additional applications to the school, I found a registration line that spanned approximately four blocks long. Nearly every person in that line was a college student. Voters from the neighborhood and school faculty distributed bottled water and power bars to the people standing in line. It is difficult for me to imagine turning away young people from the polls because they did not register 15 or even 30 days prior to an election.

In Wisconsin, State law clearly identifies that Election Day registrants must be prepared to provide a proof of residence that includes their name and registration address. The legislature has approved a comprehensive array of acceptable documents that can include student identification cards, leases, property tax bills, government issued identification, and utility bills. An elector may also produce a corroborating witness who will certify their identity and address. The level of cooperation from voters in producing this document – and from election workers in securing the document – is profound. Election Day registration is a process that recognizes the hardships often presented by identification requirements but also ensures public confidence in the integrity of the election.

Finally, while administering Election Day registration does require an additional investment, there is tremendous effort saved through minimal provisional ballot voting. In the 2006 gubernatorial election, there were only 40 provisional ballots issued to voters. It is distressing to report that of that 40, only three contacted the Election Commission after the election so that their votes could be included in the election results. While offering at least an option to voters, provisional ballots do little to address many of the barriers to voting that are becoming increasingly institutionalized on a national level.

It has become well-evidenced that, as a nation, we must continue to invest in our election systems. Voter-related legislation should be directed toward expanding what is good and public enthusiasm and confidence the voting is good, as is preventing barriers that keep members of the public from the polls. Let us be certain that we have not or do not compromise the historic integrity of voting and citizen participation in elections by responding to sensationalized anecdotal information about voter fraud.

Elections should be about inspiring and engaging people, particularly young people or people that have been disenfranchised by the political process, to participate in democracy. In Wisconsin, we do not believe in setting up barriers that prevent students from experiencing the power of casting their first ballot, or further disenfranchise the more transient residents of the City - or the poor and elderly - with cumbersome and restrictive ID requirements, or people who perpetuate a fear of voting among people with felony convictions that have completed probation or parole. Wisconsin's election experience, as one of only eight states in the nation offering Election Day registration, has demonstrated that Election Day registration is a critical and essential tool to encouraging voter participation and does not contribute to voter fraud. My hope is that this philosophical belief in encouraging voter participation – not discouraging – is embraced beyond the current list of eight states and is met instead with national enthusiasm.